



# **(Re)Inventions of the Body in the Irreducible Liminality of Samba: the Cuíca theory**

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**ABSTRACT – (Re)Inventions of the Body in the Irreducible Liminality of Samba: the Cuíca theory** – This article aims to think about the specificities of the gender performativities of dissident bodies that practice samba performances in Rio de Janeiro. A reflection on social reinventions in samba schools is proposed; and about how the potential for creation intrinsic to samba, understood in Benjaminian terms as its aura, needs to be resumed in contemporary times. Based on the concepts proposed by Walter Mignolo, of liminal thought and irreducible colonial difference, of *cruzo*, intersections of Simas and Rufino, the interweavings between queer studies and local contexts of race and class are discussed. Finally, a proposal is elaborated to think about the samba dissident bodies from what we call the Cuíca theory.

Keywords: **Body. Coloniality. Samba. Queer. Cuíca.**

**RÉSUMÉ – (Ré)Inventions du Corps dans la Liminalité Irréductible de Samba: la théorie Cuíca** – Cet article vise à réfléchir sur les spécificités des performativités de genre des corps dissidents qui pratiquent des spectacles de samba à Rio de Janeiro. Une réflexion sur les réinventions sociales dans les écoles de samba est proposée; et sur la manière dont le potentiel de création intrinsèque à la samba, compris en termes benjaminien comme son aura, doit être repris à l'époque contemporaine. Sur la base des concepts proposés par Walter Mignolo de pensée liminale et de différence coloniale irréductible, de *cruzo*, intersections de Simas et Rufino, les intersections entre les études queer et les contextes locaux de race et de classe sont discutées. Enfin, une proposition est élaborée pour réfléchir aux corps de dissidents de samba à partir de ce que nous appelons la théorie Cuíca.

Mots-clés: **Corps. Colonialité. Samba. Queer. Cuíca.**

**RESUMO – (Re)Invenções do Corpo na Irredutível Liminalidade do Samba: a teoria Cuíca** – Este artigo tem como objetivo pensar as especificidades das performatividades de gênero de corpos dissidentes que praticam performances de samba no Rio de Janeiro. Propõe-se uma reflexão sobre reinvenções sociais nas escolas de samba e sobre como a potencialidade de criação intrínseca ao samba, entendida em termos benjaminianos como sua aura, precisa ser retomada na contemporaneidade. A partir dos conceitos propostos por Walter Mignolo, de pensamento liminar e diferença colonial irredutível, de *cruzo*, intersecções de Simas e Rufino, discutem-se os entrecruzamentos entre os estudos *queer* e os contextos locais de raça e de classe. Por fim, elabora-se uma proposta para pensar os corpos dissidentes que sambam a partir do que se nomeia como a teoria Cuíca.

Palavras-chave: **Corpo. Colonialidade. Samba. Queer. Cuíca.**

## Samba and its Schools

Over the decades, samba schools have become complex organizations with specific modes of operation. They arose from the need to build community spaces for practicing black knowledge, institutions on the *morro* [hillside], on the margins of the official state, which could reverberate the ways of being of the Afro-diasporic epistemologies. Regarding this constitution, Luiz Rufino and Luiz Antonio Simas (2018, p. 58) say:

African cultures, apparently wrecked by the fragmentation brought about by the experience of captivity, were redefined through the creation of associative institutions (*zungus*, saint's *terreiros*, carnival associations, etc.) for the invention, construction, maintenance and dynamization of community identities.

Its social function has never been limited to the carnival period defined by the Gregorian calendar. Their parades are just one way of expressing their existence, not the only reason for it. "Schools parade because they exist, and they don't exist because they parade"<sup>1</sup> is a well-known and quoted maxim among *sambistas*<sup>2</sup>. The schools play an important historical role in maintaining and reinventing the traditions of Black bodies in Rio de Janeiro.

It is in the samba schools that many racialized bodies find space to develop their skills and artistic pretensions. They are the cradle of countless *intérpretes* [singers], composers, painters, sculptors, dancers, *ritmistas* [musicians], percussionists, among many other categories of artists who have developed from samba, either within the carnival spaces themselves or beyond them. With the capture of samba as a representative of Brazilian nationalism, several samba voices achieved international success singing the knowledge practiced by the bodies of the suburbs, *morros* and *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. Samba schools are fertile territories for creation because they are, themselves, assemblages of different chants, dances and bodily actions that could only resist and exist from them, after all, "[...] as much as colonialism has subjected us to cognitive dismantling, to the disorder of memories, to the break of belonging and to trauma, today we are the heirs of those who rebuilt themselves from their shards" (Rufino; Simas, 2018, p. 13). The body that samba is a body filled with life, "[...] a body [that] is not empty. It is full of other

bodies, parts, organs, pieces, tissues, kneecaps, rings, tubes, levers and bellows. It is also full of itself: that is all it is” (Nancy, 2015, p. 87).

However, contemporary samba schools have established contradictory relationships with hegemonic power. As institutions that produce a global reach spectacle that is of great importance to the local economy, they have had to negotiate with the state and the companies that invest their capital in the carnival festivities. These negotiations have transformed the way samba schools relate to the city and, consequently, to their communities. It is not my intention here to offer a nostalgic view of what samba and its schools were like before this process, as in São Clemente’s nostalgic samba from 1990, reissued on the avenue in 2019, which said in its verses “que saudade/ da Praça Onze e dos grandes carnavais/ antigo reduto de bambas/ onde todos curtiam o verdadeiro samba”<sup>3</sup>. The aura that has been lost cannot be recovered as it was, in its completeness. What can be done is the unfinished restoration of its meanings. So how can we, in the face of the spaces and scenarios set up today, perform the power of reinvention of the body that gives samba its body, and which has been undermined over the years? And furthermore, given the possibility of this performance, how could it be an instrument for the reinvention of gender performativities?

### **The Body that Sambas<sup>4</sup> and its Potency**

Samba’s potentiality was subtly dismantled by the institutions that colonize the body, under a discourse of acceptance and mediatization. The samba schools emerged as counter-hegemonic institutions, but were absorbed by the state and capital, like spilled beer absorbed by a napkin, in a double movement. On this subject:

The first will try to make the popular festival official, emptying it, to some extent, of its parodic, critical and iconoclastic traits; the second will try to commercialize it, turning it into a spectacle and an object of consumption. Questioned as the symbol of an official and commercialized Carnival, the sovereign of the revelry gradually stops mocking the dominant order and crystallized truths (Coutinho, 2006, p. 159).

Thus, there was a movement to domesticate carnival, since its parades on the avenues were manifestations that could be relatively controlled and that resembled, in some way, the *civilized* carnivals of the European elite. Secondly, the legitimization and promotion of the schools by the cultural

industry took discursive power away from the community bodies and gave it exclusively to their political representatives and those who controlled these negotiations. Communities stopped speaking for themselves and began to have their discourses mediated:

In Brazil, since the abolition of slavery, the development of capitalist relations and the strengthening of civil society have seen a change in the forms of social domination. The old strategy of physically repressing the carnivalesque forms of *'populacho'* gave way to a cultural project that aimed to stifle the subversiveness latent in these forms of revelry, in order to integrate them into the official worldview, reinterpreting their signs and discarding any rebellious, explosive, uncontrollable tendencies (Coutinho, 2006, p. 25).

Certainly, these relationships have always been very conflictive, considering the relationship between samba school leaders and criminal associations such as drug trafficking and *jogo do bicho* [gambling]. It is not my intention here to delve deeper into this debate, but to highlight the fact that there have been, and still are, strategies by the institutions of power to depotentialize the bodies that practice samba. This is a project of depotentialization, since, as Coutinho points out:

This perspective involves the consideration that, to dominate culturally, the ruling classes are obliged to recognize the people as cultural subjects, to share a culture with the subaltern layers. It was up to the press, as a private apparatus of hegemony, to seek consensus, to include the popular in the masses, to build a common, national-popular culture (Coutinho, 2006, p. 26).

On the other hand, if we consider samba's potentiality as its aura, we can say that its overthrow is not its disappearance, but the emergence of new contexts in which it can exist. Faced with the decline of samba's aura, what we *sambistas* can scribble<sup>5</sup> as a reaction is the creation of another body that samba. Taking Benjamin's concepts and Didi-Huberman's (2015, p. 269) reading of them, let's consider that "[...] origin, in Benjamin, names 'what is being born in becoming and in decline'. [...] The decline of the aura presupposes [...] the aura as the original phenomenon of the image, an 'unfinished' and 'always open' phenomenon". The undermining of the creative potency of samba presupposes, then, that this potency is the phenomenon that gives rise – that allows something always in process to be experienced – to the body that sambas. It is about establishing a corporeal move-

ment, a dance between breaks and *gingados*, with what exists as a memory of the past and survives in the present.

Under Leda Maria Martins' (2021) concept of *spiraling time*, it can be said that this play with reminiscences is the maintenance of the curves of tradition, which always returns to a past without repeating it in its entirety. It is a different kind of repetition, which passes through another place precisely because it is not a circle, but a spiral. It is a movement that distances itself from any complete restoration of the past as it was, from the danger of a redemptive return (Didi-Huberman, 2015). How can the body that sambas exercise its counter-hegemonic potency based on the negotiations that operate in the present? One possibility is to appropriate them in ways that cheat, from the inside, the institutional operations that attempt to colonize the body, using as tools the knowledge and practices of the past, taught by the bodies that made samba a possible way of knowledge.

Thus, the past is neither rejected nor resurrected, but “returns as an anachronism” (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 274), in what we can call a dialectical image. The body that samba, in its desire to boost the potentiality that samba gives it, activates the different temporalities that cross it, establishing links with its ancestral force and with the becoming of what can be reinvented. Just like the image, the body that sambas is a “crystal of time” (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 274), where we find not only the “once” and the “now”, but also what is after, the future, the beyond. In this drive to (re)creation of the body that sambas, it is also possible to think about an original practice in action, new ways of understanding and presenting oneself as a body beyond the spaces of samba. If it is through a *critical memory* that something can be *originated* in the present, it is essential to embody the practices of samba in order to (re)potentialize the body that sambas.

In this sense, “[...] we start from the assumption that the experiences circulated in the practices are unique, inexhaustible and non-transferable, they become entangled by aligning a complex and diverse web of knowledge” (Rufino; Simas, 2018, p. 27). This recovery of the potency of creation means activating memory in gestures, in action, in dance, in chant, in the gaze. Often history is transmitted as a dead past, under the veil of something that was lost and could never return. Laments such as “back then it was good”, “in the old days we used to do real samba”<sup>6</sup> are common. The path of this way of dealing with samba is its destruction, its death and dis-

enchantment, which Alcione cries out so much for not to happen in the verses “não deixe o samba morrer/ não deixe o samba acabar /o morro foi feito de samba /de samba pra gente sambar”<sup>7</sup>. This posture of lamentation in the face of a supposedly lost potency, which here can be read as the aura of samba, engenders nothing but its death. We get held hostage by the impossibility of fully recovering the past. This is not the posture of samba.

What samba scribbles as knowledge is tradition as movement, it is the reinvention of the past in the now, always unfinished and open to what may come. The mothers and fathers of samba were those who, faced with the imminent death of their practices, originated other ways of manifesting themselves and giving continuity to life. Samba is an experience that takes place *here*, in the very place of its performance, but which relates to a *beyond* that is both past and future. After all, there is no samba without the ancestral presence of bodies that inhabit other planes of existence, just as there is no samba without the presence of the samba to come. Once again, we turn to Benjamin’s aura, this “singular web made up of spatial and temporal elements” (Benjamin, 2012, p. 184) that serves as an allegory at the crossroads of samba. The potency of creation that samba has as a possibility is this *cruzo*<sup>8</sup> de espaços e de tempos, morada da abertura do corpo que dribla a violência, desvia-se do policiamento das subjetividades, para exercer sua liberdade no deslocamento de sentidos.

In a practical way, and putting the *samberes*<sup>9</sup> into a spin, it is necessary to leave the peaceful place that hegemonic institutions have imposed on samba and once again perform its destructive, transgressive, subversive force. It is not a matter of demanding this posture from the samba schools as companies and from their leaders, who have largely surrendered to the plastered choreographies of capitalism. It is a revolution that must come from us, *sambistas*, from our bodies, which are potentially revolutionary, and which together can *(re)quebrar* [break] the stiffened hips of hegemonic subjectivation policies. Collectively, each body in its individual and singular process of formulating knowledge, but in such a way that it is possible to *(re)construct* the practice of invention through samba.

The encompassing of samba by hegemonic institutions has also led to attempts to erase its revolutionary character. This means that, even if its story is told by official history, the way this discourse is constructed makes its strength and creative power invisible. The takeover of the discourse on

samba by colonizing policies is a strategy to weaken the bodies that sambas. This is why reclaiming this power is so important. The discourse on samba needs to be emanated by bodies that samba, by *bambas* [masters of samba], by those who carry the knowledge practiced in samba as life wisdom, as a philosophy of life. It is from this experience that the power of creation can circulate among bodies in an active way and as a driving force.

This in no way means denying the important changes that negotiations with the hegemonic power have brought about in the samba schools. The professionalization of the spectacle allows thousands of workers and artists to have carnival and samba as a stable or temporary source of income, which also benefits the communities themselves through social projects that take place throughout the year. This economic role of the samba schools should also be praised and the struggles for better working conditions within this system should continue. This is exactly where the non-attempt to fully restore the past lies, as there is no desire to return to the precarious economic and social conditions of before. However, given this scenario, we can think about how to change this machine by being inside it. It is possible to maintain the samba school parades as a spectacle in negotiation with the media industries, while at the same time reclaiming the creative power of samba as a possibility for reinventing the body. The spectacle can even be an instrument in favor of this revival. The conditions are given and what we can change are the ways in which we relate to them and make use of them to maintain or modify them.

Therefore, it is possible to say that the potential for creation provoked by samba has never been lost or completely erased because it is intrinsic to it. What we need to do as *sambistas* and bodies that samba is to take it back and restore it as an opening in a central place within our daily practices. It is about not restricting the effects of *samberes* to the territories of samba, but of performing them in all spaces. But then, how do we occupy life and the world with samba?

### **Samba as Liminal Thought**

Samba is part of an Afro-Brazilian epistemology that was formed from the shattered knowledge of the African peoples who were violently brought to these lands. It is one of the fruits of the elaborate set of knowledge that the

black body formulated through its Afro- diasporic practices. Samba is a consequence of the modernity and coloniality that are at the roots of the Brazilian constitution. According to Walter D. Mignolo (2003, p. 82), the modern world system is the “[...] genealogy of thought from local histories that have absorbed global projects”. The European countries that founded modernity and colonization elevated their local histories to the level of universality, as if they were absolute truths with the right to dominate all other histories. The thought of the modern world system is intended to be hegemonic and, to do so, it needs to annihilate other ways of thinking, because “[...] the construction of the Western canon has led to its edification to the detriment of the subalternization of an infinity of other knowledges based on other logics and rationalities” (Rufino; Simas, 2018, p. 21). Any epistemology that is not itself is disregarded, which explains why the *samberes* are considered inferior in Brazil, as well as all the other epistemologies practiced by racialized bodies, which are belittled in the category of “popular wisdom”.

In Latin America as a whole, and not just in Brazil, the colonial period is not the only context in which coloniality exists. These are different concepts. The colonial period is a time in official history when the territory was ruled politically by representatives of the colonizing state. Coloniality is a way of thinking that crosses time and is updated to maintain the operation of the practices of the modern world system. It is responsible for maintaining, in Latin America, an imitative tradition in relation to European philosophy (Mignolo, 2003), a desire to continue mirroring the civilizing models taught by the colonizing mission. “America, unlike Asia and Africa, was included as part of the extension of Europe and not as its difference” (Mignolo, 2003, p. 91), which perhaps helps us to think why coloniality considers the whole body of knowledge produced by Latin American bodily experiences as inferior versions of its own knowledge.

This misunderstanding is a strategy of violence and an inability to understand local histories from elsewhere. “Westernism [...] as the dominant imaginary of the modern world system, was a powerful machine for subalternizing knowledge [...] while at the same time establishing a planetary epistemological standard” (Mignolo, 2003, p. 92) and then “[...] Orientalism [...] was a particular rearticulation of the imaginary of the colonial/modern world system in its second phase, when Westernism, structured and implemented by the Spanish and Portuguese empires, began to fade”



(Mignolo, 2003, p. 95). In other words, the colonial/modern world system can update itself in different ways to keep power under its control. The transformation of samba into a nationalist product was one of these strategies, because it did not mean transferring power to the suburbs, *morros* and *favelas*, but capturing the strength of their bodies for capitalist production that maintains power in the institutions of coloniality. These strategies are thought out in a very specific way, considering the ways in which the local histories of each colonized territory behave in the face of the imaginary of the world system. They are implemented and staged differently in particular places (Mignolo, 2003).

Walter Mignolo's analyses of how Abdelkebir Khatibi and Edouard Glissant used liminal thought and decolonization as a form of deconstruction, are pertinent for us to reflect on the conditions of the formulation of samba and its performance as a methodology of thought. For Mignolo, Khatibi's writings perform a double critique by thinking about Western and Islamic fundamentalisms at the same time. This gesture of critically thinking about both traditions that cross him as a body in a territory that has been colonized makes it possible for a liminal thought to emerge that is not based on either of them.

These spatial confrontations between different concepts of history, between such different local histories, are a necessary condition for the existence and creation of *another thought*: "another thought' is possible when different local histories and their particular power relations are taken into account" (Mignolo, 2003, p. 103). This is a way of thinking that seeks to escape dichotomies and the danger of being trapped in a place that no longer exists or a place that exists only as an ideal image. Faced with the impossibility of one way or the other, it is thought that critically assumes the liminal position that coloniality establishes.

To the sound of Mignolo's concept, it is possible to say that samba is *another thought*, a liminal thought that was developed by black bodies in Rio's *terreiros*. In this case, however, it is not just a *double* critique, because the basis of samba as a thought is made up of countless traditions. At the crossroads where the body of samba is based, many paths cross and, for this very reason, conflict is constitutive of the body that sambas. The formation of samba as a way of thinking did not happen smoothly, as each Afro-diasporic tradition also wanted to maintain as much of its knowledge as

possible. It would be wrong to think of this construction in a peaceful way, as if there were not also divergences and clashes between Afro-diasporic cultures. That is why samba is a thought that stems from these traditions, but is not located in any of them, but rather in a territory founded on liminality, on the *cruzo*, as in a culture of syncope:

The cultures of syncope provide us with the conditions for practicing stunts that will tear apart the supposed universality of the Western canon. Driven by the wisdom of these cultures, our main challenge is to transgress the canon. To transgress it is not to deny it, but to enchant it by crossing it with other perspectives. In other words, to spit it out at the crossroads. While some mentalities insist on reading the world in dichotomies, stubbornly overcoming one side by the other, the power of syncope is inscribed in the *cruzo* (Rufino; Simas, 2018, p. 19).

For Mignolo (2003, p. 104), “the potential of ‘another thought’ is epistemological and also ethical”. The author argues that it is epistemological because it is not inspired by its own limitations, because it is open to formulations that are not restricted to an immobile position. And it is ethical because it is universally marginal, fragmentary and not ethnocidal, precisely because it does not pretend to be hegemonic in the face of other ways of thinking. Similarly, samba’s potential for creation is also epistemological and ethical, given that its practice over time has led to the emergence of various types of knowledge that have been generated in its spaces of sociability. “This political and epistemological fold is crucial for an ethical and aesthetic repositioning of populations and their productions that have historically been seen, from totalitarian rigors, as subaltern, non-credible forms” (Rufino; Simas, 2018, p. 11). If we consider only the artistic fields, we will have countless examples of techniques for producing costumes and allegories, poetic and melodic constructions, choreographic movements, which are implicated in the “*ziriguidum* epistemology”<sup>10</sup> embodied by samba. Added to this is its ethical commitment to fostering the pulse of life in bodies, to stimulating singing and dancing as practices that enchant the body. It is a challenge to the politics of coloniality and a dismantling of the imaginary of the modern world system and its global projects.

Thinking specifically about the Brazilian context, we can say that there are both institutions that perpetuate the practice of coloniality and those that take on decolonizing practices. Thus, this practice is particularized, to a

certain extent, when placed in relation to ways that happen in other Latin American countries or on other continents, such as the Arab countries, which suffered European colonization. Within Brazil, we find silenced societies and silencing societies. There are the institutions that are an offshoot of European colonization and the institutions that were organized by indigenous people and Afro-descendants. According to Mignolo (2003, p. 108), silenced societies are “[...] societies in which there is speech and writing, but which are not heard in the planetary production of knowledge, guided by the local histories and local languages of the ‘silencing (i.e., developed) societies’”. In Brazil, we can consider the Portuguese language to be dominant and silencing, while indigenous and African languages are silenced. Brazil is home to thousands of languages that have died out over time due to the ethnocide practiced by coloniality. There are those that still resist and fight for their places, but the only language considered official is the Portuguese language, brought by the Portuguese colonizers.

We could mention others, but in keeping with the focus of this research, samba is one of the types of knowledge that emerges at the intersection, at the crossroads between the silencing language and the silenced languages in Brazil. This is because samba embodies the language of the drums and the cultures of the peoples who originated it. There are many people who were initiated into Afro-Brazilian culture through samba. To this day, samba schools use words, sounds and philosophies of African origin in their plots and sambas to stimulate and set in motion their practices. To list just one case, we can mention União da Ilha’s 2017 samba, with a carnival about the creation of the universe for the Bantu people. With verses such as “Salve, rei Kitembo/ Nzara Ndembu em poesia/ Pra dar sentido à vida, transformar/ Numa odisseia rasga o céu, alcança a terra/ Sagrada é a raiz Nzumbarandá/ Katendê, segredos preserva”<sup>11</sup>, the school sang terms and *inquices* [deities] that are part of Afro-Brazilian culture, but which are little known even by practitioners of religions of African origin, since the popularity of Nagô and Yoruba cultures is greater. For many *sambistas*, the narrative told by Ilha was their first contact with the Bantu language.

Because of these issues, it is possible to say that the experiences of bodies with the coloniality cannot be generalized in Brazil. Our country is rich in local histories, and within each region, there are local histories that establish themselves as superior because they mirror the modern world system.

In the specific case of Rio de Janeiro, there is the local history of an elite of whiteness as an intelligentsia, which pretends to be global by imagining itself as a “same” as local European history as a global project; and there are the local histories of racialized bodies that are on the margins of cultural spaces and that develop their liminal thoughts from the experience of fragmentation. Not only samba, but also various other liminal thoughts that occur through bodily performance, such as funk, slam, rap, *jongo*, *capoeira* and various religious manifestations.

It is in these activities that new languages also emerge, such as the dialects and slang of specific groups. “Another thought’ is to think in languages, between two languages and their historical relations in the modern world system and the coloniality of power” (Mignolo, 2003, p. 112), but in this case, not just between two languages, but a multiplicity of them. This plural and multifaceted constitution is also what makes each of these thoughts a unique experience. Thus, it would be wrong to say that they are equivalent in an analysis of liminal thoughts in Rio de Janeiro, after all, each experience is intertwined by the coloniality of power in a different way. This is what Mignolo calls *irreducible difference*. For him, it is not possible to summarize the experiences of colonial differences as complementary perspectives, but they are differentiated by their particularities.

### **The Irreducible Dissidence through Samba**

The question of irreducible difference will be important for us to think about sexual and gender dissidence from the samba performance. “The key configuration of liminal thought: thinking from dichotomous concepts instead of organizing the world into dichotomies” (Mignolo, 2003, p. 126) can be extended in the samba experience to concepts that articulate possibilities beyond dichotomy, thoughts from polytomous concepts. Samba breaks with the Eurocentric epistemological perspective and with those practiced in the African cultures from which its *batuques* (drumbeats) and gestures came. It finds an epistemology of the *cruzo* and the form of this rupture is the irreducible difference between the monotopic critique within the modern world system and the double and pluritopic critique from outside it. Thus, its potential to create and reinvent ways of being in the world does not have, or should not have, any commitment to the notions estab-

lished by the colonizing logics of the bodies of modern Western thought, which includes the way we socially perform gender roles.

The hostility perpetrated against difference through a hegemonic discourse of cis- heteronormativity is largely due to a pernicious tendency to view the complexity of the world in binary terms, thus invalidating the dissident, the ambivalent, the non- conforming or molded to regulatory norms (Morais, 2020, p. 60).

A first step in this syncopated movement is to question the identity categories in which bodies that supposedly do the same thing, which are supposedly the same, are grouped under a gaze that assigns markings to bodies from a very safe place where power is exercised without being seen or marked. Some common places of identity are used when talking about the bodies that sambas. The most recurrent is the categorization by the adjective “popular” as a mode of intellectual inferiorization and as an attempt to reduce a heterogeneous range of experiences to fixed and superficial images. It is not a question of denying this adjective or these places of identity. On the contrary, the discourse on them is important. What is latent is the questioning of their use by hegemonic power as a method of neglecting a whole plethora of knowledge and practices in favor of a disinterested classification that would be enough to solve the problem. After all,

We must question the category of identity, of this ‘identical to oneself’ as a stable, coherent and unifying category of experiences, even more so when every achievement of someone of a certain identity seems to assume that there are no singularities, but rather that they are expressions of identity and not performances situated locally and historically (Pereira, 2022, p. 79).

The way in which a gender dissident body that sambas relates to gender performativity is not the same as that of another body that agencies other knowledges. It is wrong to place the body of a cis homosexual man who practices in Rio’s elite as equivalent to the body of a cis homosexual man who practices samba in the suburbs. The white *bicha* [queer] from Alto Leblon [‘noble’ neighborhood] is not the same as the racialized *bicha* [queer] from Madureira [periphery neighborhood]. Although both are crossed by issues of gender dissidence, the way in which their bodies produce performativity is irreducible to each other, as they start from different performative experiences of embodied knowledge. What I mean to say is that the performance of samba provokes artifices for gender performativities whose dif-

ference is irreducible to others. So, it is up to the dissident bodies that samba to exploit this potential in their social experiences with samba and with the world.

This problem of identity grouping that disregards the irreducible colonial difference is also present in the critique of queer studies by E. Patrick Johnson and analyzed by Fernando Luís de Moraes. For both authors, the studies of queer theory, although important and necessary, are sometimes insufficient for thinking about the experiences of dissident bodies crossed by race and class. By aiming for a total break with identity classifications and claiming to be an anti-identity, queer theory disregards the fact that the social contexts imposed on racialized and poor subjects are preponderant in their gender performativities, which leads to a generalization of the queer experience as a body within whiteness that enjoys the privileges of the upper-middle class. If “[...] queer subjects are disturbing because they react, they do not bow down and they transgress. Queer bodies too; they are electrically transient, subversive, antagonizing bodies, endowed with charge, potency and beauty” (Moraes, 2020, p. 31), it is plausible to say that being queer can also mean reacting to and subverting academic studies on the queer experience, aiming to dynamize the thought so that it is not fixed under specific gazes from the perspective of the modern world system.

The assumption that all queers are affected by the same mechanisms of oppression leads, in a way, to a return to a normative matrix that obliterates other differences, relegating other subjects to ostracism. Any attempt to analyze subjects based so simply on the notion of gender identity would be, so to speak, limiting, as it would disallow the emergence of other identities that are evident but muffled (Moraes, 2020, p. 64).

It is based on these concerns that Johnson thinks of a *quare* analysis as a fold on queer theory, incorporating race and class as fundamental crossings to think about the experiences and studies of sexuality and gender. For the author, “*quare*’ [...] not only crosses identities, but also articulates them. ‘*Quare*’ offers a way of critiquing stable notions of identity and, at the same time, situating knowledge of race and class. My project is one of revision and recuperation” (Johnson, 2020, p. 85). Within Johnson’s study, we find the strength to echo, with our drums, *batuques* [drumbeats] that give body to samba as a performative rhythm of genders in Brazil and, more specifically, in Rio de Janeiro.

Johnson's *quare* studies is a theoretical proposal that draws on "[...] the *vernacular* roots implicit in my grandmother's use of the word to formulate a strategy for theorizing racialized sexuality" (Johnson, 2020, p. 84). *Quare* was the word his grandmother said when she pronounced *queer* with her heavy southern American dialect. *Quare* was already born, for Johnson's analysis, as a racialized way of thinking about queer. In his research about sexual and gender dissidence in the US, the author highlights the importance of the politics of resistance practiced in black communities for the existence of racialized queer bodies and cites black churches as an example. They are marginally safe places where people can seek refuge and formulate strategies against the coloniality of power, and where many queer bodies find "a place of spiritual affirmation, comfort and artistic outlet" (Johnson, 2020, p. 114).

However, the author also points to the need to critique these places from within them, emphasizing the critique against the denial of *quare* subjectivity within the church. Thus, by proposing the perspective of *quare* studies in the US context, Johnson opens up the discussion and a liminal path of thought for sexual and gender dissenting bodies in the country, as it is situated in a critique of both queer theory marked by certain privileges of modernity and its project of a global imaginary, as well as racialized communities intertwined with the coloniality of power, which deny subjectivities that break with binary performativities. With these considerations in mind, how can we develop a similar critique within samba schools?

### **Scribbles of a Cuíca Theory**

When we bring the discussion to the Brazilian context, we also need to critique and review queer studies from the perspective of our historical situation. Seeking to think about studies of sexual and gender dissidence from epistemologies consolidated in the body, we have examples of intellectuals and authors who cross queer theory with the experiences practiced here and who open new perspectives on the crossroads of sexuality, gender, race and class.

One case of these decolonial uses of queer theory is the transformation of queer into *cuir*, an incomplete translation that brings gender studies closer to Latin American realities. The thought on the *cuir* body has fostered

various studies that generate tensions, reflections, repercussions and contradictions about the dissident experience from the global South. In this way, the “[...] ‘cuir’ approach, from the perspective in which its thought favours the modification of ways of reading culture and subjectivities, from the proposition of breaking hierarchical, culturally naturalized and taken as institutional perspectives” (Inácio, 2018, p. 238), enables articulations located in the ways in which queer theory is devoured and modified by Brazilian bodies:

Cuir, when read in Portuguese, also refers to *cu* [butthole], as access to what is kept hidden. It is in this sense that Larissa Pelúcio suggests treating queer studies as *cu* [butthole] studies, in a provocative, unpalatable translation, so that the field can open to new possibilities of contestation (Altmayer, 2018).

By talking about her experience as a dissident body and outlining strategies on how to organize information about the world in our favor, the artist and researcher Pêdra Costa questions her self-identification as a *kuir* body. This proposal would be a seizure of power over ways of negotiating with institutional systems, offering what they ask for to enter them, but occupying them in a critical and subversive way.

When I bring up the word *kuir*, I bring up the point that we will not accept being civilized by their European integration, because we already know this deeply. It is a resistance. A resistance that cannot be demonstrated in all its potency directly, but in a politically strategic way, because there are many issues involved in occupying art spaces (Costa, 2016, p. 356).

To think about what samba performance can provoke as a movement and creative drive for dissident gender performativity, it is essential to bring all the historical and ancestral instruments that underpin samba into the *bataucada*<sup>12</sup>, as has already been said. This agency of the times and spaces that are constitutive of samba is important, because “[...] we need to explain the temporal and spatial specificity of the performance not only to shape its existence, but also to name its modes of signification” (Johnson, 2020, p. 100). This being the case, I propose the *requebrada*<sup>13</sup> articulation of a theory based at the crossroads between samba performance and gender performativity. This is *Cuíca* theory. It is a theoretical proposal as a strategy for reclaiming samba’s potential for creation and reinvention in the light of its irreducible colonial difference. It spits on queer theory to turn it into a *cuíca* – an instrument for transforming the body into samba.



Its characteristic rumble can be identified from afar and on the first note it already creates expectation for the samba that will be played. It is a friction drum that has a wooden rod fixed internally to the skin of the drum. It is played by rubbing the rod with a damp cloth, combined with finger pressure on the outside. Its origins are inconclusive, but it is known that its technique gained a foothold in Brazil through Afro-diasporic bodies. The *cuíca* is one of the great representatives of Brazilian Afro-musicality.

Samba schools, as already mentioned, are communities that are configured as support networks for bodies crossed by issues of race and class, and which make possible practices of Afro-referenced epistemologies and methodologies. However, they are not always places free of violence for sexual and gender dissident bodies. This relationship is troubled because, even though great dissident artists have written their names in the history of the samba schools and revolutionized their carnival parades, there are strong manifestations of male chauvinism and misogyny ingrained in the roots of the associations.

Therefore, the struggle to occupy these spaces by dissident bodies has never been peaceful and continues to this day in an intense and tireless manner. Perhaps it is a symptom of this the fact that there are so many plots and sambas that address issues of race and class and few narratives that deal with reflections on sexuality and gender. This means that the reinventive movement of the body that sambas, of the *Cuíca body*, is ambivalent, because it puts into play, into dance, what samba performance and gender performativity can put to *requebrar* in each other's hips.

This *embalo e bamboleio* [rocking and rolling] between performance and performativity goes from top to bottom in this experiment. But why *Cuíca* theory, *Cuíca* body? Firstly, because of the sonic proximity of the name. Almost because of the parodic nature of “queer/quir” being transformed into “cu”-íca through language. “Cuí”ca theory. A detour, a syncopated swing of the tongue that slides until it reaches the “cu”-íca of the body. *CUÍca*. The word *cuíca* agencies power the in all its possible meanings, what already speaks to the multiplicity of ways in which the *corpo-queer-que-samba-cá* [body-queer-that-sambas-here] can perform in the city. The “que(er)cá” body decomposes and recomposes itself in the composition of the samba.

However, it also signifies beyond the language game, even as the gigantic slips of the tongue persist. The *cuíca* is a friction drum and its touch requires friction between bodies, between two matters that rub together to produce a third one, which is the sound. So too is the *Cuíca* body. It is a body of friction, the friction of concepts that are rubbed together until a thought emerges that is neither one nor the other. It is another materiality, another way of propagating through space-time. The friction of modernity and coloniality is the violent condition that provokes the pleasurable echo of the samba and sets in motion the discursive processes of identification and subjectivity of the *Cuíca* body.

It is also in the friction of the bodies that make up the samba community that *Cuícas* practices are potentiated and circulate. It is a collective act that triggers affective processes, the sweaty experience of a body that mixes with the sweat of others. Sweaty knowledge that the skin has turned into wet material aiming to lubricate the friction of time. Shared experiences as ways of teaching and learning. One teaching and learning from the other. Friction of looks, of experiences, of ways of attacking and protecting oneself. Samba as a space for rubbing certainties, ideas that come from outside with ideas generated inside. Sips of beer, sips of *cachaça*. Laughter, tears, love and hate circulating in friction like the feet of *passistas* [carnival/ samba dancers] scribbling on the floor. There is no room for binarism in friction because what is generated is always another. The *Cuíca* body is transgression through friction, the transbinarity of the rubbing. Friction heats up, generates sparks and fire. The friction of *Cuíca* practice sets fire to the *gongá* (altar) of cis-heteronormativity. Like the drum ensemble of *Mocidade Independente*, *não existe mais quente* [there's nothing hotter].

As well as friction, the *cuíca* also needs the pressure of the fingers on the skin of the drum to be played. The fingering that touches the skin can also be an allegory of the fingers as the sexual practice of the *Cuíca* body. The fingers taking the place of the patriarchal phallogentrism of cis-heteronormative relationships. Fingers that touch the other and touch themselves, bringing to themselves the potency of provoking pleasure. The investigation of the body's erogenous zones, of groping the skin under different pressures that produce different sensations, vibrations and orgasms. *To cuicate* the sex, *to cuicate* the body. Linking fingering to rubbing, in movements that talk to each other to generate waves of pleasure. Touching

the body with the desire to play a samba, to pulse life. Not necessarily excluding the phallus but bringing the fingers and other devices to the same place of potentiating pleasure, of provoking jouissance.

The rumble of the *cuíca* is like the rumble of an engine. It is a harbinger, a warning, an alert that there is a pulsating energy in motion. It is the sound that breaks the silence of static coherences and summons the body to the *bole-que-bole* [rock-and-rolling] that destabilizes colonial gender constructions. The rumbling of the *Cuíca* body is a shake-up in the classic rhythm of what it means to be a man or a woman. The steps of the masculine and feminine performativities of the modern world system taught by the institutions of the coloniality of power are impossible for the *Cuíca* body, because it is syncopated by the samba.

According to María Lugones (2014, p. 936), “only the civilized are men or women” and, in this logic, only the colonizers could be civilized. Even when colonized bodies are designated as men and women, when the racialized population is marked with these labels by modernity/ coloniality, it would have been a transformation not in identity, but in nature. This is why Lugones (2014) says that no woman is colonized because no colonized female is a woman, according to what it means to be a woman in the modern Western system. If “decolonizing gender is necessarily a praxis” (Lugones, 2014, p. 940), the rumble of the *Cuíca* body influences this making of the body from its active subjectivity. Because it is a practice of friction, it is the making of the body in the performance itself, a rumbling that proclaims “a performative agency to work in and against oppressive systems” (Morais, 2020, p. 102). The *Cuíca* body is a site of discursive and social effect. The knowledges articulated in the performance of samba, in the rumble of the *cuíca*, are survival strategies in everyday practices. The *Cuíca* body resists through friction “between subjectification (the formation/ information of the subject) and active subjectivity” (Lugones, 2014, p. 940). The place of friction is proper to the

Colonized [...] as a being who begins to inhabit a fractured locus, constructed doubly, which perceives doubly, relates doubly, where the ‘sides’ of the locus are in tension, and the conflict itself actively informs the subjectivity of the colonized being in multiple relation (Lugones, 2014, p. 942).

For the body that sambas, this friction can only give samba; and for the *Cuíca* body, this samba is the possibility of creating gender performa-

tivities that scribble the steps of its own experience as a body in the world. It is about not wanting to be, or perform, what it is to be a man, what it is to be a woman, or even what it is to be gay, lesbian, trans, asexual, non-binary, following the parameters of whiteness, parameters that have never been subjugated by their spatial and temporal contexts, by race and class biases. The irreducible difference of coloniality makes this dance impossible. The bodies trapped in this attempt at dance are doomed to the frustration of not being able to exercise their own subjectivity and never being accepted as themselves by white cis-heteronormativity. They will be, at most, an inferior same. This is why spatial, temporal and historical awareness of the territory in which these performances take place – in this case, samba – is so important.

Based on this discussion, we can say that samba performances have the potential to break rigid and inflexible structures and reinvent practices based on the experiences of the body. Given that the coloniality of power has strategies for coercing this potency, it is crucial that it is taken up again and activated in different performative spheres. The knowledge practiced by the body in samba performances needs to be incorporated into everyday performances. Such a move requires awareness of the irreducibility of these practices and their multiple possibilities for creation from the fragments of the world.

As far as gender performativity is concerned, the dissident bodies that sambas, because they are crossed by racial and class issues specific to the context of samba territories, create strategies of existence that are untranslatable to other gender experiences. The potentiality of samba provides the means to create performativities that fracture hegemonic certainties and scribble with the traditional dance steps of cis-heteronormativity. By conceptualizing these bodies as *Cuícas*, we intend not only to investigate how queer theory unfolds in the context of samba, but also to encourage this theoretical possibility to be a space for experimentation to be expanded. Fostering an understanding of this irreducibility is intended to instigate the identification of the specificities of these performativities and, with this, to highlight and overflow them.

Finally, through the practice of their subjectivities and localized *sambas*, sexual and gender dissident bodies can reactivate the power of creation provided by samba and exercise the reinvention of their bodies in a

frictionless, syncopated, *gingada* and *requebrada* way, deviating from the categorizations of coloniality, but aware of the contextual crossings that affect them and make their experiences irreducible. In this way, in these *rodas* and *giras*, they invent scribbles of what can be called a Cuíca practice.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The historian and intellectual Luiz Antonio Simas (2019) is one of the big names who promote this philosophy when thinking about the current situation of samba schools.
- <sup>2</sup> Translation note: A Sambista is usually an expert samba dancer or a composer of sambas; in a broader way, is someone who is somehow involved in the making of samba (singing, dancing, playing instruments).
- <sup>3</sup> *E o samba sambou...*, G.R.E.S. São Clemente 1990/2019. Composed by Chocolate, Helinho 107, Mais Velho and Nino. A close translation can be: “Oh, the nostalgia/ for Praça Onze and the grand carnivals/ the former haven of samba masters/ where everyone used to enjoy the true samba”.
- <sup>4</sup> Translation note: In this text, the word “sambas”, when referring to something or someone, shall be considered as a conjugated verb, not as a plural for samba. “He/She/It sambas”, means that the subject practices samba in one or various of its ways of manifestation.
- <sup>5</sup> Scribbling (*rabiscar*), in this context, is the elaboration of a gesture based on the body’s own experience in movement. It is a procedure present in the act of samba and transferred to scientific practice as a methodology. I develop the concept in a more elaborate way in my master’s dissertation (Almeida, 2022).
- <sup>6</sup> Phrases uttered by nostalgic samba dancers in discussions about the current situation of samba schools. Originally: “naquela época é que era bom”; “antigamente é que se fazia samba de verdade”.
- <sup>7</sup> *Não deixe o samba morrer*, sung by Alcione and composed by Edson Conceição and Aloisio Silva Araújo. A close translation can be: “don’t let samba die/ don’t let samba end / the morro was made of samba/ of samba for us to dance”.
- <sup>8</sup> Intertwining, intersection. Concept developed by Rufino and Simas (2018).
- <sup>9</sup> *Samberes* (samba + saberes) is a way of naming the knowledge (in Portuguese, *saber*) practiced in samba. Term taken from the short film *Tenho receio de teorias que não dançam* (*I’m afraid of theories that don’t dance*) (Bahia, 2021), con-

ceived by the artist Dodi Leal and directed by Gau Saraiva. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdbfQmWJLoU>. Accessed on: March 13, 2023.

- <sup>10</sup> Ziriguidum as an epistemology is a “[...] set of knowledge gathered by living the samba school, a well-founded, reflected opinion, a paradigm of living in community with multiple knowledges structured on experience”. This is a concept developed by researcher and carnival artist Milton Cunha. More details are available in the video *A sabedoria da árvore (episteme ziriguidum)* (2021). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HASUGY9HLlk>. Accessed on: 13 Mar. 2023.
- <sup>11</sup> *Nzara Ndembu – Glória ao Senhor Tempo*, G.R.E.S. União da Ilha do Governador, 2017. Composed by Beto Mascarenhas, Dr. Robson, Felipe Mussili, Gustavo Clarão, Lobo Junior, Marcelão da Ilha, Marinho, MM and Rony Sena. A close translation can be: “Hail, King Kitembo/ Nzara Ndembu in poetry/ To give meaning to life, to transform/ In an odyssey tears the sky, reaches the earth/ Sacred is the root Nzumbarandá/ Katendê preserves secrets”.
- <sup>12</sup> Translation note: “*Batucada*” refers to a lively and rhythmic percussion performance involving a group of percussionists playing various instruments like drums, tambourines, and other percussion instruments, associated with *roda de samba*, where the energetic and syncopated rhythms create a vibrant atmosphere.
- <sup>13</sup> Translation note: The word “*requebrar*” is used in Brazilian dance, especially in the context of samba. It refers to a rhythmic and sensuous movement of the hips and body, often characterized by swaying, shaking, or gyrating. It involves a fluid and expressive movement of the hips that adds a dynamic and alluring quality to the dance.

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